

critical digest

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The Weekly Newsletter Digest of the Current New York Theatre Scene

Future NY Openings

Women of Twilight-Plymouth, 3/3/52. Sylvia Rayman's new play features Betty Ann Davies and Mary Merrall...Paris 90-Booth, 3/4/52. Cornelia Otis Skinner's new solo production...Three Wishes for Jamie-Hellinger, 3/5/52. Bert Wheeler, Anne Jeffreys and John Raitt in new musical.

Digests of Current Reviews - more inside

Venus Observed-Century, 2/13/52. Split decisions filed by weekly reviewers on Theatre Guild's production of Christopher Fry's new verse drama, staged by Laurence Olivier and starring Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer, are even more diverse than those of their weekly colleagues. Variety, Cue, New Leader and George Jean Nathan recommended it. Hobe, Variety, billed script as Fry's most intelligible and entertaining, the production and acting enjoyable, if not always understandable. Trade paper critic didn't think costumes too becoming. Gabriel, Cue, joined cast who enjoyed themselves with more rhyme than reason. Fry, he quipped, is the intellectual's Ariel. Shipley, New Leader, tabbed it the crown of the season, though he complained that Palmer was miscast. Nathan printed hypothetical argument with his companion G.J. Critical-Conscience, and finally concluded that this was the kind of enjoyable theatre experience that defied criticism. If in this dreadful season, he stated, the public isn't a sucker for something like this, despite its faults, they can stay away from the theatre altogether. Dissenters included critics of Billboard, Newsweek, Time, New Yorker and WCBS Bill Leonard. Latter panned proceedings as tawdriest, most unoriginal of bedroom farces and predicted an early doom for it. Major complaint was that Fry was enmeshed in his own poetry to such a degree that the script was incoherent. Newsweek man suggested that Venus should have stood in bed between her book covers, while Time critic feared that play on stage lacks pace and flow. Gibbs, New Yorker, admits Fry must have had time of his life writing script, but he felt disappointed that play didn't seem as important as it promised. Dissenters also doubted if Olivier's direction helped. Harrison won top acting honors, with John Williams runner up. Palmer was praised more for her beauty, than her histrionics.

Jane-Coronet, 2/1/52. Two completely different views of S.N.Behrman's past work resulted in a "pro" review from Krutch, Nation, and a "con" review from Clurman, New Republic, on Theatre Guild's production of his new play based on Somerset Maugham's story. Former found play perfect Behrman at his best, proving that there is always time for comedy as sparkling and as deft as this work. The entire production has a warmth, geniality and fundamental kindness which most smart comedies deliberately avoid. But the New Republic critic looks upon Behrman as a playwright in search of material. Though play has pleasant moments of shy jocularly and smoothly worded deviousness, the practice becomes tedious. Behrman's trouble, explains Clurman, is that he is afraid to tell the real story he has in his mind. Critic also hopes that some day producers and directors will stage a Behrman play without heavy "English accents" and as the poetry really is. Both critics complimented Edna Best and Howard St. John.

News & Notes

Chapman, News, to lecture at University of Miami in April...Shuberts won \$6000 judgment against Show of Month for Let's Make An Opera flop rents...ANTA membership rally offered "Dramatic Recital" matinee to 1200 featuring Caryl Stone, Ruth Draper, John Carradine and Truman Capote.

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' A Key to NYC Criticism At A Glance '

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|------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. NY Times | 12. Chr.Science Monitor | 23. WCBS Leonard |
| 2. NY Herald Tribune | 13. Journal of Commerce | 24. Commonweal |
| 3. NY News | 14. Morning Telegraph-WFDR | 25. Cue |
| 4. NY Mirror | 15. Ward Morehouse | 26. Nation |
| 5. NY Compass | 16. George Jean Nathan | 27. New Leader-WEVD |
| 6. NY Post | 17. Wall Street Journal | 28. New Republic |
| 7. NY Journal American | 18. Women's Wear | 29. Newsweek |
| 8. NY World Telegram | 19. Billboard | 30. New Yorker |
| 9. Brooklyn Eagle | 20. Variety | 31. Park East |
| 10. L.I.Press | 21. Critical Digest | 32. Saturday Review |
| 11. Newark News | 22. Theatre Arts | 33. Time |

Shows are rated as to how the critics liked them, not if they think they will be hits. "So-so" means the critic did not state directly if he recommends the show for an entertaining or stimulating evening. Unless otherwise noted critics voted "pre."

AFFAIRS OF STATE-9/25/50	Con: 1-6-9-11-12-15-16-17-18-22-23-24-25-28-29-32. None: 10-14-21-26-27. So-So: 31.
CALL ME MADAM-10/12/50	Con: 19-22-26-28. None: 10-14-21-23. So-So: 3.
THE CONSTANT WIFE-12/8/51	Con: 3-25-30. None: 11-13-14-15-17-18-21-26-28-31-32.
THE FOURPOSTER-10/24/51	Con: 2-6-15-16-22-24-27-30-33. None: 14-18-26-28-29-32.
GIGI-11/24/51	Con: 1-4-5-6-8-12-15-25-27-28-32-33. None: 14-23-31.
GUYS AND DOLLS-11/24/50	Con: 26. None: 10-21.
I AM A CAMERA-11/28/51	Con: 3-5-7-12-27-28. None: 10-13-14-18-21-26-31. So-So: 1.
JANE-2/1/52	Con: 2-7-9-19-24-27-33. None: 5-10 thru 16-21-22-26-28 -31-32.
THE KING AND I-3/29/51	Con: 26. None: 10-21-22-24.
THE MOON IS BLUE-3/8/51	Con: 16-22. None: 10-21-26-32.
PAINT YOUR WAGON-11/10/51	Con: 2-6-7-15-20-23-24. None: 14-18-27-28-31-32.
PAL JOEY-1/3/52	Con: 27. None: 13-14-17-28-31-32.
POINT OF NO RETURN-12/13/51	Con: 8-16-22-26-27-28-33. None: 7-11-14-21-23-31.
REMAINS TO BE SEEN-10/3/51	Con: 1-7-16-18-21-22-24-26-28-30-33. None: 12-13-17.
THE SHRIKE-1/15/52	Con: 8-16-22-26-27. None: 12-13-14-17-21-31-32.
SOUTH PACIFIC-4/7/49	Con: 33. So-So: 25. None: 5-9-10-11-21-24-26-27-28.
STALAG 17-5/8/51	Con: 4-25-26-27-30. None: 10-21-22. So-So: 3.
TOP BANANA-11/1/51	Con: 6-7-27. None: 12-26-28-31-32.
TWO ON THE AISLE-7/19/51	Con: 2-3-26. None: 10-12-27-28-32.

' Theatre News Round up '

Shows that closed include Desire Under the Elms..."The Outer Circle" group of out of town drama critics met to plan details of May awards...Dick Williams, Theatre Arts, ill from penicillin poisoning...William F.McDermott, Cleveland Plain Dealer, spent week in NYC...Three thousand nine hundred forty-two plays and musicals copy-right in 1951...Darkness at Noon dispute briefs filed with three man board of American Arbitration Association...Scott Merrill subbing for James Mitchell in Paint Your Wagon, latter has fractured toe...New Haven RR next show train is March 14th for Gigi...ANTA NOTES: ANTA hopes to bring Jean Louis Barrault's Marigny Theatre Troupe from Paris for tour...Angna Enters doing program of impersonations March 8th at ANTA Playhouse for benefit of ANTA Fund...ANTA Album tentatively scheduled for April 20th.

' Green Room Department '

FREE CRITICS...Critic's function in a democracy is to interpret every fresh reaching out to something previously untried, Dame Sybil Thorndike said at London luncheon honoring "Stage" editor S.R.Littlewood. Members of the totalitarian state like to be told, she continued, instead of regarding innovation as a challenge. Littlewood expressed firm belief that theatre will always survive, because it speaks directly to the hearts of the people who are on the spot to applaud.

IDEA OF THE WEEK...If there are plays that deserve more than one attendance, why couldn't there be an arrangement where playgoers can get an equivalent seat for second and third visits at a discount, asks a Compass reader, apropos of the reader who had seen The Shrike five times. Pelleck is sure that producers would gladly sell commutation tickets, but right now their problem is getting the theatre fan to buy just one ducat.

CRITICAL THOUGHTS...Smart Broadway producer should snare Judy Garland for a musical suggests NBC Leon Pearson...Assailant who punched away in to Paint Your Wagon dressing room could not be identified as a professional critic reports Sylvester News...If Ina Claire reads new novel by Kronenberger, Time, "Grand Right and Left" she will want to play the lead, bets Morehouse, WT&S.

REPRESENTATIVE "HALL"... "Theatre Hall of Fame" to be established in honor of John Durang, first American born actor, at Franklin & Marshall College, Lancaster, Pa. must be representative of the entire theatre, recommends Burr, Playbill. It cannot be run, administered or controlled by any single organization, no matter how representative that organization may be.

"PRO" NATHAN...Though Watts, Post, sticks to his conviction that George Jean Nathan, who just celebrated his 70th birthday, can be fantastically wrong-headed, violently unfair, consciously perverse, wildly prejudiced and phenomenally blind, Watts knows that he has been one of the greatest forces for good that has come into the American theatre. By bringing high standards of judgment to bear on the theatre, he has succeeded in giving it higher critical standards in its own creative craftsmanship.

COLUMN TIPS...Margaret Truman being sought for Westhampton Playhouse, L.I. summer production of Affairs of State, hears Walker...Clark Gable may appear in a Gilbert Miller show, whispers Kilgallen.

' Digests of Current Reviews '

Mrs. McThing- Martin Beck 2/20/52. ANTA'S second subscription play of the season greeted by raves for fine performances of Helen Hayes and Brandon de Wilde in Mary Chase's new "comic fantasy", though three of the daily critics thought the author became too entangled in her own plot. Rave reviews from Times, Herald Tribune, News reviewers, mild "pros" from Post and World Telegram & Sun aisle men, and "con" verdicts from Mirror, Journal American and Eagle men complete the record. Atkinson, Times, summed it up as a combination of "Alice in Wonderland" with "Superman". Several agreed with his opinion that it is the freshest play of the year. Kerr, Herald Tribune, loved it, but did complain that mobster roles were over stylized. Chapman, News, urges ANTA to extend run past planned 3 weeks. Watts, Post, thought much of it was too heavily antic and too studiously whimsical, though the flights of real imagination and humor in the second half made it worthwhile. Coleman, Mirror, feared it was too sophomoric, while Shaeffer, Eagle, thought it was only for the kids. McClain, Journal American, doesn't believe that even the fine performances of the large cast, directed by Joseph Buloff, can sustain the meagre and frothy premise. Hawkins, World Telegram & Sun, enjoyed show but thought it would improve after several weeks of playing the magical comedy will play more tightly.

' Drama Desk Meets Four Stars '

Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer covered the world of the theatre during question period of February "Drama Desk" luncheon meeting honoring them. Olivier and Leigh are starring in the two Cleopatras, while Olivier directed Harrison and Palmer in Venus Observed. Though most of the questions of the NY drama reporters were aimed at Olivier, the others had interesting views on diverse subjects.

The 44 line speech Lilli Palmer recites in Venus Observed means precisely nothing she admitted. Director Olivier had explained to her that it was merely Fry's exercise in speech. Palmer, the wife of Rex Harrison, noted that they did their current show against the advice of friends who said it would end their beautiful friendship with the Oliviers. But the beautiful friendship has now turned into a grand romance. She expressed extreme pleasure at working with a director who could do exactly what he wanted his actors to do. A reporter who asked why her formerly blonde hair was now dark got a frank answer stating that in the course of time hair must either go dark or grey.

Harrison agreed that it was great fun working with Olivier on their current show. British actors are more experienced than their American colleagues, he explained, because of the repertory theatres where they get to play many roles in a short time. Having just finished making the film version of The Fourposter, he has no further plans in mind after the current limited run of 16 weeks is over.

Tremendous amount of space and interest devoted to the theatre in American newspapers impresses Vivien Leigh. In opposition to the Harrisons who will only appear in plays together from now on, Leigh explained that this rule doesn't apply to the Oliviers. At present Christopher Fry is writing a play on Henry II that doesn't include a part for her. "If the proper parts open up they don't have to appear together. Actually, she came to Hollywood to do The Streetcar Named Desire role in the films, while her husband appeared in the London production of Venus Observed. Her favorite roles, she commented, were the prize winning portrayal in The Streetcar Named Desire and her role in The Skin of Our Teeth. American matinee audiences, she noted, are more prompt than evening audiences.

Matinee business in London is very bad, Olivier pointed out, probably because this type of audience went out with the "leisure class." If asked to state the difference between American and British audiences he would state it in terms of their respective matinee audiences. In the United States matinee audiences come to the theatre to enjoy themselves, while in London they come to be irritated with culture while having their tea. American producers missing a vast untapped suburban audience by not having twice weekly 7:00 PM curtains, he believes. An exchange of actor-managers to play at his own London theatre is Olivier's ideal. In this vein he issued an open invitation to Jose Ferrer to play in any show of his choosing at any time. Olivier expressed no favorite in their current twin bill, stating that acting is work. Producer Gilbert Miller answered that his favorite was the Antony and Cleopatra, because Shakespeare doesn't collect royalties.

' Legit Stuff '

Mrs. McThing released to Children's Theatre Conference royalty free...British actors in NYC held memorial service for King George VI at Little Church Around the Corner, Laurence Olivier delivered the memorial address...Tickets for Wednesday matinee performances of Caesar and Cleopatra available...Call Me Madam closes May 3rd to play a month in Washington...Two on the Aisle, closes March 15th to tour the country.

